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SIDELINED NOT RETIRED

The idea of a V8 Supercar season without Greg Murphy was almost beyond belief, but that's the way it is in 2013. One of the most popular drivers tells what his plans are and why retirement isn't an option... yet.

If you think stepping down from a full-time drive in Australia's premier motorsport category means Greg Murphy has the time or inclination to sip cocktails by the pool, think again.

The 40-year-old Kiwi is keeping his race skills sharp with his New Zealand V8 SuperTourer commitments (in the Mike Pero Racing Commodore) as well as preparing to race with Holden Racing Team (HRT) in this year's endurance events, in a return to the team that gave him his big break in Australia and with whom he won Bathurst in 1996.

There are sponsorship duties to take care of, and maintaining the fitness regime which keeps him in trim for driving as well as helping him recover from last year's two back surgeries. There will also be just a tad more time for some aspects of his life that have been neglected because of the time and effort that have gone into his career.

"Number one on that list would be my family – my kids (11, nine and five) and my wife," he says.

"That's been the sacrifice. I'm not the only one who's done that, but something like this makes you look at other parts of your life and change your focus to other important things."

After 15 seasons in V8 Supercars (he made his full-time debut with HRT in 1997 after years in karts and open-wheelers), 'Murph' says he's actually quite excited about looking at his life in a different way.

That's not to say he won't miss the hustle and bustle of full-time V8 Supercars racing, but he is certainly not viewing 2013 as 'the end' of his motorsport career.

It's not 'retirement', but neither is he thinking about what 2014 might hold.

"Missing out on a seat was difficult to accept at the end of



last year when it became a reality, but life changes and this is just another change," he says. "You have to look at the positives – hopefully – that come out of it, and look to new and different things, take change on board as a positive."

"I certainly don't see this year as a 'fightback' for a full-time gig next year. It's a bit early to think about that. I'm going to focus on what I have – the enduros with HRT and the SuperTourers in New Zealand – and do the best I can with that."

"I don't have the financial backing to buy a drive, and I'm not looking to put myself in that position either, so this is the way it is. A lot of things will happen this year that may or may not give me the opportunity to look at that as a possibility for 2014, so we will wait and see. Next year is a long way away to even think about!"

Pointing the finger is the last thing Murphy is doing about his current position. He says there is no one person or set of circumstances that have led to him sitting out this year.

Rather, he believes a combination of factors – including his own decisions – eventually left him the odd man out in the annual game of musical chairs.

"Some of the decisions I made a few years ago changed my position in V8 Supercars; took me away to a position where I was just a hired hand, to do the job. Tasman [Motorsport, the Murphy family team] probably contributed a bit to that."

"We had a plan for what we wanted to achieve, and that took me out of circulation as a driver available to do a job with another team. When that started to

ABOVE: "I'm thirsty Garth, thirsty for some more Bathurst bubbly."

LEFT: The aftermath of the crash that put the brakes on Murph's V8 Supercars career.





HRT WIN
Scan to watch
Murphy and
Lowndes win
Bathurst 1996

fall apart, I'd probably missed the opportunity to be in a strong position for drives with other teams.

"Then there was the simple fact that there were several years that I didn't perform and the back issue, getting older, the financial situation within the game... it was getting tougher, probably a mix of all those things puts me where I'm at.

"It is tough out there. The sport is winding its way through a change, a very major one, and that's the way it goes. There's no point pointing the finger anywhere.

"You make your bed. The last few years were pretty tough and it just wasn't where I needed to be to do what I know I am capable of doing, and so be it."

If this sounds like he has some issues about his time with Kelly Racing, the team owned by his former Kmart Racing colleagues, Rick and Todd Kelly, the answer is no and yes.

"At the start, you know, they gave me a lifeline," he explains. "There was no question about that, and I am very appreciative of it, but it was hard there and there were lots of things going on.

"Then last year, their announcement of joining up with Nissan was very significant for them, but 2012 turned out to be an interim year and we never really looked like being a factor in the competition."

Then, of course, came the big crash with Jonathon Webb in Adelaide when Murphy injured his back and missed five events.

The team stood by him and the Kiwi eventually returned to duty, but he says it was very clear that Kelly Racing was simply marking time.

"There was no question that things were very much underway for 2013 and 2012 was just a period of time they had to get through," he says. "For them, it was what they had to do. From my point of view, it wasn't what I wanted or needed – or anything that made me happy. That is the truth and while some people may not like to hear it, that's a fact."

In the wake of the Nissan announcement, Rick Kelly suggested the team wanted to keep Murph – and why not,

given he and the Kiwi had won Bathurst together in 2003 and 2004 – but obviously it would mean renouncing Holden allegiance and the long-time personal sponsorship deals on both sides of the Tasman. A tough call.

Murphy admits he thought about it briefly, but once he made his mind up, there was no future with Kelly Racing. And beyond the Kellys, there was precious little else.

"It is fantastic to have another manufacturer in the sport and for Rick and Todd, but they needed a driver with funding to help out and James Moffat obviously comes with that," he says.

"I think my Holden relationship and all that stuff didn't help. It was going to be pretty hard to go from all those years with Holden to another manufacturer, and for who knows how long. And probably they knew I was pretty disappointed with the way the year had finished, so all those things led to the way it played out with them.

"Beyond that there were very few seats and very few teams. I know I'm still capable of being very competitive as a full-time racer, but teams needed funding, and I didn't have any money to take anywhere – and I didn't want to be part of a team that couldn't provide a strong prospect of winning races.

"Anyway, while there were encouraging discussions with some of the Holden teams, there was never really an offer on the table, so there wasn't a decision for me to make – there were just no options."

Murphy cannot see himself as anything but a Holden man, even though he admits the relationship has changed. However, while he may no longer be one of their leading lights, his loyalty to the brand remains steadfast.

"Holden has supported me all the way through," he says. "I understand they've had to change the way they do things over the years and focus their involvement in fewer areas. It's just the way things are.

"They've had to focus on a couple of teams that will do the job for them – and I am very excited to be part of that this year with HRT. It should be fantastic!"

For a man who always shines at the Mountain, there could not be a better team to be aligned with considering its recent record at Bathurst – four wins from the last decade.

That Murphy/Holden link is just as powerful across the

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'ditch', but times have changed there too. Murphy is proud of, and grateful for, the strong ties with Holden and HSV in New Zealand and pleased that it will continue, but things have also tightened there, in the way money is spent.

He will contest the full SuperTourer series this year now he's fully recovered, and while he's not chasing a full-time drive here (yet), a successful season over there won't hurt his chances.

"I feel very fit," he says. "I have to do everything I am doing this year and prove that there are no issues, but I don't see why there would be. I'm assuming the back injury would have played a role in where I am now, in any team's decision, if they were considering me.

"And fair enough too. I'd be taking that into account if I was hiring someone, but I don't have any issues driving a car, and that's the main thing. You've got to be able to get the job done, and I can – and as long as that's the case, that I'm not a broken-down mess, then that's fine."

Given he is feeling so good, but is not in a full-time 'gig', the obvious question is whether he has anything on his wish list.

"I haven't actually thought too much about it, would you believe?" he laughs.



Murphy admits his three-year spell at Tasman Motorsport hurt his V8 Supercars career.



Murphy struggled in his final season at Kelly Racing, sidelined for part of the year by a back operation.



Running the unfamiliar number 11 in his first season with Kelly Racing, Murphy hits the skids at the Sydney 500.

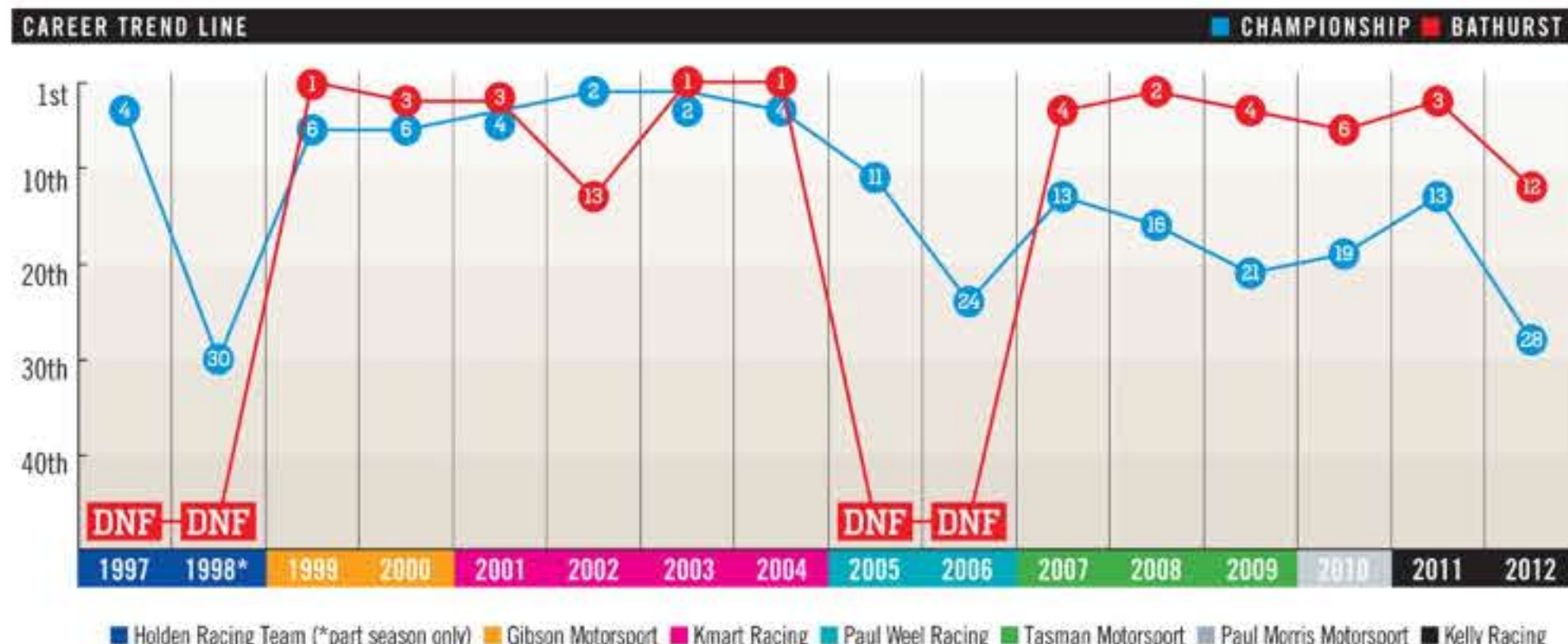


Though Murphy's Kmart days are best remembered for his Bathurst exploits, it was the closest he came to a championship win.

VITALSTATS

Active years: 1994-current
 Teams: Bruce Miles (1994), Holden Racing Team (1995-1998), Gibson Motorsport (1999-2000), Kmart Racing (2001-2004), Paul Weel Racing (2005-2006), Tasman Motorsport (2007-2009), Paul Morris Motorsport (2010), Kelly Racing (2011-2012), Holden Racing Team (2013)*
 Races: 194
 Race wins: 28
 Round wins: 11
 Bathurst wins: 4 (1996, 1999, 2003, 2004)
 Pole positions: 13

*Endurance co-driver only.



Since making his full-time debut in V8 Supercars in 1997 off the back of victory at the Mountain in 1996, Murphy has been more of a threat at Bathurst than in the championship, as demonstrated above. Bathurst results in red and championship results in blue.

"There are a lot of things I haven't done that I would like to do, but how realistic some of them might be is another thing. Previously I was stuck in a schedule that takes your whole year and that was my life for a very long time, but things are a bit different and now maybe I can start thinking about doing some other things.

"I'd love to go and do more races overseas, do a Daytona or Le Mans again (he was second in the GT2 class in 1996) and that kind of stuff, but it's not as if because I now have the time, or more time, it's just going to happen. It's not that easy.

"Australia's not the only country going through tough times,

so there are a lot of drivers out there who have done those races year after year who don't have drives. So for the moment I'm focussed on a few things here and as soon as I get on top of those, I might be able to put a bit of effort into working on some other projects."

The SuperTourers series runs throughout the year with a three-month gap in the winter. Murphy will be kept busy with racing and sponsor commitments in his homeland throughout the series, as well as with HRT in the lead-up to the enduros, but he says that little patch of quiet time in the middle of the year could see him trying to put a few other possibilities in place...

"But there's nothing definitive. I really haven't given too much thought to it because the reality is my year is not that much slower than it was before. It's just a different schedule."

By the middle of the year he believes we will all have an idea of how the 'Car of the Now' plan is working out, and hopes the Australian series will be starting to rebuild itself after a difficult few years.

"The whole make-up of the championship has changed a bit and I hope it can strengthen up again and teams can stand on their own two feet, and start to make less compromised decisions in some places.

"It is very difficult to see what's going to happen and where it's going to be, and in six months time we might have a different view of where it's going. V8 Supercars is the pinnacle of motorsport in this part of the world and I hope the fans will embrace the changes that have taken place.

"Things can't stay the same forever and seeing some new sheet metal competing out there is exciting. I certainly hope it takes off and is a raging success."



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